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AUTHOR Zeit, Alois
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ABSTRACT

A redesign of the basic foreign language courses at the University of Michigan--Flint, stimulated by a need for improved enrollment and retention and for more language majors, had the result of improving faculty cooperation and teaching. Before the curriculum development effort, the program reflected individual faculty preferences and characteristics, and the attitude that curriculum problems were to be dealt with by the department chairman. The curriculum change took the form of rescheduling of courses into two tracks, a comprehension track and a combined comprehension/speaking track. Results included some additional teaching time, a 20% enrollment increase, faculty scheduling problems, and some unforeseen problems of coordinating classroom practice and instructional materials. In response to these problems, faculty members began to consult with each other about teaching methods and strategies and to be less concerned about individual instructional autonomy. In addition, the department applied for and received a federal grant to bring a consultant to campus to evaluate the program. The presence of the consultant resulted in even more open exchange among the faculty and administration, with students, with the consultant, and with another institution. Subsequently, a new faculty commitment to quality in the introductory courses and a plan for faculty performance evaluation also developed, and the department was further supported by an institutional award for excellence in teaching. (MSE)

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Alois Zeit
The University of Michigan

Uniting the Faculty Behind a Changed Curriculum

This paper gives an account of the positive impact on faculty cooperation and teaching brought about by a redesign of our basic foreign language courses.[1]

Background

The Department of Foreign Languages at the University of Michigan-Flint does not employ teaching assistants nor does it have a supervisor/coordinator in charge of teaching basic courses. The department has always prided itself on giving its members the broadest independence in "running" their classes. This independence gradually developed through 1972, as experienced and capable instructors were hired to bring the department to nearly its present capacity. With a total staff of nine responsible for teaching French, German, and Spanish, there existed little reason for an overseer. Coordination of teaching multi-section courses included little beyond the selection of common textbooks and an agreement on the amount of material to be covered. Whenever there was a need to supervise or coordinate it was understood that the chairperson would handle the situation.

Ours was perhaps a prime example of a faculty that, over the years, developed in the fields of literature and linguistics in accordance with personal preferences and the expectations for tenure and promotion. However, in the area

of teaching basic language courses "professional growth" seemed to have taken more the course of an enhancement of certain early-acquired idiosyncracies. Individual department members gained a reputation for what they did especially well: place an overly strong emphasis on pronunciation, use the cumbersome machinery of the language laboratory for drills instead of the live voice, explain and re-explain grammar, use translations as the only true test of a student's achievements, or employ literary texts as the basis for teaching virtually any language skill. In addition, there was occasionally the "type" that would not teach first-year courses but complained that students did not learn much until they enrolled in his classes.

Thus, what students received in our department was solid teaching together with the distinct touch of a given teacher's proclivities.

With an excellent faculty and strong individual commitment, we were convinced that we did the best job possible. Yet, the sum total of our efforts did not produce the desired results in enrollment, retention, and number of students majoring in foreign languages.

To be sure, occasional grumblings about different methodologies employed among teachers were voiced, but there never was an attempt made to "interfere" with the autonomy each teacher enjoyed over his/her classes.

Curriculum Change

In 1980, we did something that looked to the dean and other faculty of the college as if we had come out of hibernation. Perhaps all too hastily, we revamped our basic courses in French, German, and Spanish. We wanted to attract those additional potential students who either had scheduling problems or were interested in learning mainly the receptive skills.[2]

Scheduling at our institution has been a problem for years. At a commuter college with most of its classes being for three hours of credit--meeting Monday, Wednesday, and Friday for one hour each, or Tuesday and Thursday for one-and-a-half hour each--foreign languages with required meeting times on four days a week were an oddity.

With the new two-track system (see figure, representative of French, German and Spanish), we have adjusted our courses to the general pattern of course offerings at the college. The two tracks consist of:

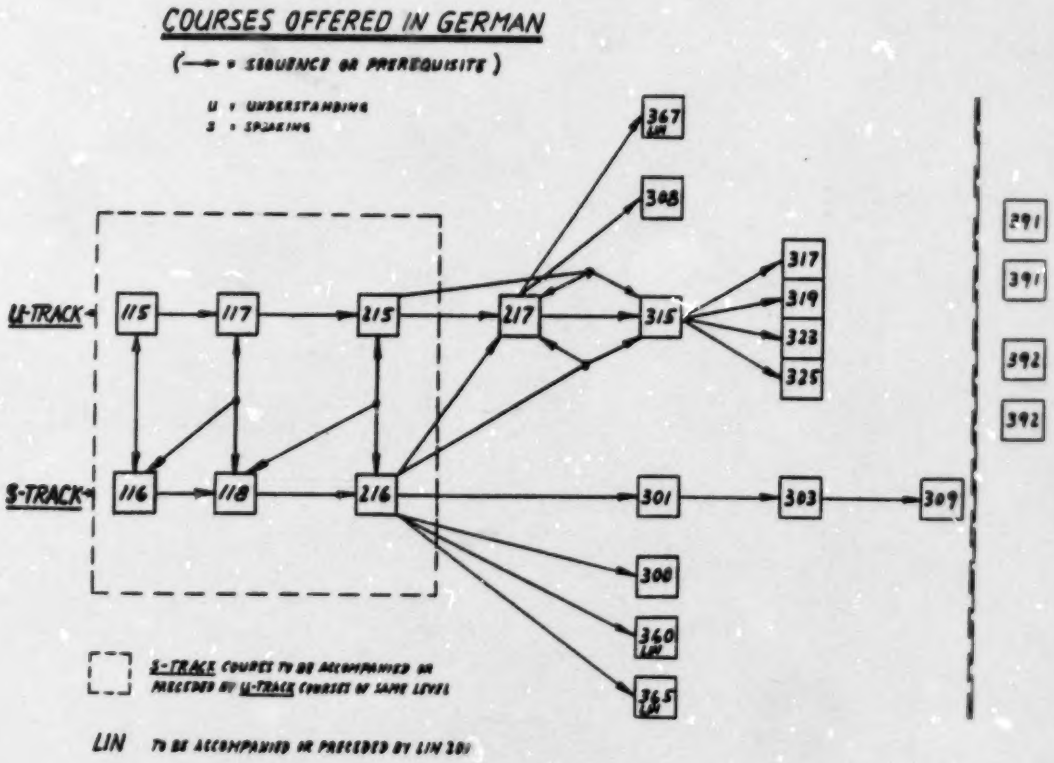
(A) the "understanding" track (115, 117, 215), and

(B) the combined track of "understanding" (above), and "speaking" (116, 118, 216).

Understanding classes meet three hours a week and carry three hours of credit each; speaking classes meet two hours a week for one hour credit. Understanding classes can be taken without being accompanied by speaking classes. Understanding is meant for students who desire a knowledge of mainly the passive skills (e.g., scientists, wanting a

reading knowledge), or for those students for whom the new five-days-per week combined track presents a scheduling problem.

The combined track is meant for students seriously desiring to acquire speaking proficiency along with the rest of the languages skills. Students enrolled in a speaking class must also be enrolled in, or have completed, the corresponding level understanding class.[3]



We anticipated that about half of the enrollees would elect the combined track. These students would meet in classes of no more than 13 members on Tuesdays and Thursdays

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for intensive speaking practice. On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays these students would join the understanding-track students in sections of up to 25 members. We were aware from the beginning that there might be a danger that (at least in the mind of the students) combined-track students would have and advantage over the understanding track students. Careful attention was, therefore, given so that course contents of the two tracks do not coincide. So far, we have not experienced any negative effects from "separating and mixing."

Consequences of Curriculum Change

By fall 1983, after three years of transition and implementation under this system, the unofficial departmental assessment was that we had no drawbacks (other than added class time for teachers), that enrollment had increased by 20 percent, and that the potential for the future was promising.

While the redesign of courses caused almost instant enrollment increases it also brought about a series of unforeseen problems for the faculty. For one thing, the three-day or even two-day per week teaching schedules, a distinct possibility under the system, did not materialize because the department is too small. Instead, teachers who used to have one day a week off under the old system now found themselves teaching five days a week. It also did not add to the morale within the department that the speaking courses, meeting twice a week for one credit, required class

time that did not appear on the record.

But these problems aside, the most serious concern turned out to be a series of practical problems hitherto unknown to a faculty set in its way: The separation of speaking from the rest of the skills in elementary classes seemed to us an artificial divorce of learning components that should be taught and practiced together. Available textbooks were not written to fit either the emphasis of understanding (perceptive) skills only, as we perceived them, nor were they fit for the reduced contact hours. Different instructors had different views of what the new approach to teaching these courses should be. The speaking-only classes presented the immediate problem: We had never been faced with a situation where we had to teach a beginning foreign language totally devoted to active speaking and without the crutch of a textbook.

It was at this point that positive things started to happen among the faculty of the department. People sought each other's advice. There was a lively exchange of experiences and ideas about teaching. Lunch table discussions evolved around the subject of teaching the new courses and, for first time, we held special meetings on the subject of teaching. The typical agenda items were methods and approaches, emphasis on individual skills, objectives of courses, development of common syllabi, and testing.

A departmental decision to change the course structure of basic foreign language classes had brought about a jolt; it shook up the status quo and gradually led to an

atmosphere of genuine cooperation. It was a time of need for exchange of ideas, a situation of give and take--in short, the teachers had turned learners again. This in itself created nothing less than an aura of excitement. For the first time in years experienced teachers felt both that they had made drastically new discoveries in the classroom and that they were also in need of new ideas. It was an atmosphere of anxiety, growth, learning, and sharing.

The new course structure had been in place for two years when the faculty of the college, in April 1982, approved a limited but much appreciated foreign language requirement for Bachelor of Arts candidates. The new three-hour course structure helped much to swing the faculty in favor of the language requirement.

The Consultancy

While these were certainly factors to celebrate, there was also the feeling among the faculty that we had somehow created a strange and unusual class structure. After all, what we had done in our restructuring represented a stark departure from the norm. Since the changes were made without a prestigious school serving as a model in this enterprise, there was a need for evaluation of our venture. What we were lacking--working in isolation--was perhaps a stamp of approval by an objective and neutral, but experienced voice.

It was at this stage that the department applied to the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) to bring to the campus a consultant for the purpose of evaluating our

program.[4] Although the grant application was written for the purpose of "strengthening our foreign language and literature program," the real benefit of the grant was, as it turned out, a unification of the faculty within the department.

Applying for the grant was in itself a process of bringing a less than cohesive faculty together. The grant coordinator had to, by directive of NEH, prove that the majority of the department members were supportive of the consultancy. With the chancellor of the college, the provost, and the dean in favor of the grant (the grant did not involve any cost to the institution),[5] the foreign language faculty did with varying degree of enthusiasm, but without exception, approve of the grant application.

The consultancy grant period lasted for 11 months (May 1, 1983 - March 31, 1984). It involved several visits by the consultant[6] to the campus where he met not only with the department faculty (collectively and individually), but with all top administrators, student groups, language classes, and department and program heads with whom foreign languages should have close ties.

Following is a summary of activities and conditions brought about by the consultancy:

1. We established and promoted free and open exchange of opinions among colleagues. Beyond departmental meetings each colleague had opportunities to voice his/her opinions,

concerns, and complaints in one-to-one sessions with the consultant.

2. The consultant functioned as an important communication link between the department and the administration of the institution--the dean, provost, and chancellor.
3. The consultant sounded out students and brought their concerns and expectations to the attention of the department.
4. The consultant provided feedback on the department's image within the different entities of the institution.
5. The consultant conveyed the expectations students, administrators, and other faculty had of the department.
6. The consultant made the department aware of curricula, teaching methods, and practices employed successfully at other institutions.
7. The consultant arranged for department members a visit to the Middlebury Summer Language School to observe teaching and confer with instructors.
8. The consultant initiated class visitations among colleagues in the department.
9. The consultancy helped reinstate a strong awareness of the department's mission within the institution.
10. The consultancy helped to bring into focus the strengths and weaknesses in the department.

All in all, the consultancy raised issues of vital interest to the professional well-being of each member of the department. Consequently, what emerged was a rigorous self-evaluation and a sincere display of goodwill toward planning for the future.

It was realized by all of us (and strongly suggested by the consultant) that the department needed to put a concerted effort into the teaching of our beginning courses. The consultancy made us realize collectively what some department members had sensed all along: Whatever weaknesses there may have existed in the program were less due to curriculum changes but to the fact that these changes were left to the individual (rather than to the faculty as a whole) to be implemented.

Thus, it was agreed to work toward making the teaching of beginning courses our first order of business. Each department member, regardless of rank, standing, and seniority, was to be equally involved in the teaching of beginning classes. An attempt to elect a supervisor and coordinator for basic instruction was abandoned. Instead, it was decided to work through standing committees both within French, German, and Spanish, and across the languages. The committee approach to supervision and coordination of basic course teaching assured the participation in decision making for every teacher in the department. The department, it was felt, was small enough to insure the effectiveness of these committees. Supervising and coordinating beginning classes

through committees in effect meant that we "democratized" the department. In so doing we avoided the potential dilemma of having a single supervisor/coordinator who, depending on his/her "clout," pedagogical orientation, and ability to deal with colleagues, might--to name the extremes--turn out to be an enforcer or be virtually ineffective.[7]

The call for a strong commitment to teaching the so-called bread and butter courses raised concerns that such teaching had always been, based on experience, little appreciated by the administration. Satisfactory professional development was usually achieved through scholarly work rather than through teaching. Thus, in the interest of equity and to prevent undue specialization among colleagues, the consultant strongly recommended that we design a staff plan--a document outlining teaching assignments, service responsibilities, and scholarly pursuits for each department member. The plan would take into account the interests of the students, the department, and the dean. It would constitute a quasi-contract between a teacher and the department, with the "blessings" of the dean. In its ideal form, the staff plan would spell out each department member's goals and responsibilities for the coming two to five years, with ongoing updating and modification. An appropriately designed staff plan would outline each teacher's performance expectations and would supply the necessary criteria upon which a teacher would be evaluated and considered for promotion.

The proposal for the staff plan received the immediate support of the dean. The department members were intrigued by the proposal and, as of now, are still "planning" the plan. But the discussions surrounding the staff plan have so far proven to be another new important demonstration of the collaborative efforts within the department.

Summary

In retrospect, it is easy to see that our much-valued independence and autonomy in teaching basic courses was carried on, in part, at the expense of common objectives in our classes. With an all-tenured faculty it would have been difficult to tamper with "tradition" and change our ways. But by redesigning our courses in a drastic fashion, we created a situation in the department where each teacher needed, sought, and offered collaboration. The consultancy provided the expertise and non-partisan atmosphere in which collaboration could be achieved in a congenial way.

The restructuring of courses helped the department in getting a limited foreign language requirement approved by the faculty of the institution. And the consultancy, as the long time former chairman and senior member of the department stated in an internal document, brought the department "not only back to life but back together, back to teaching, and especially back to the importance of basic courses."

After years of operating in the background, the department received, during this time of change, repeated

and positive publicity within the college. One of our colleagues, a recent convert to the importance of teaching basic courses, was given the institution's "Excellence in Teaching" award, and the dean has referred to the us as an example for other departments to follow.

Alois Zeit
The University of Michigan

Notes

[1] This is a revised version of a paper delivered before the American Association of University Supervisors and Coordinators, at the ACTFL/AATF/AATG Joint Annual Meeting, Chicago, 16-18 November 1984.

[2] The redesign of courses, approved by the department faculty, was proposed by our former long-time chairman and senior member of the department, Professor Frank C. Richardson.

[3] For a more complete overview of our curriculum see: Alois Zeit, "Course Design to Meet Students' Needs: Steps Toward Individualized Instruction," Individualized Instruction in Foreign Languages, Proceedings of the Third National Conference on Individualized Instruction in Foreign Languages, 12-14 May 1983 (Ohio State University, 1984), pp. 377-92.

[4] This author, who served as acting chairman of the department, 1983-84, was coordinator of the grant. The suggestion to apply for a consultancy grant was made by Claire Gaudiani during her Exxon Foundation-sponsored workshop for the Development of Foreign Language and Literature Programs, New York, December 1981, which the author attended.

[5] The consultancy grant program has been discontinued. However, colleges may now apply for similar grants from the NEH's Division of Education and its "Central Disciplines in Undergraduate Education" grant program. The address is: Room 302, Washington, D.C. 20506.

[6] The choice of a consultant was arrived at from an NEH roster and by mutual agreement between NEH and our department. Our consultant was Professor Jon Strolle, former Dean of the Spanish Summer Language School at Middlebury, Vermont.

[7] The predicament of a "weak" supervisor/coordinator is not unlike that of a junior supervisor of teaching assistants who needs, but does not receive , the support of the regular faculty. Cf. Renate A. Schulz, "TA Training, Supervision, and Evaluation: Report of a Survey," ADFL Bulletin, 12, 1 (September 1980), 1-8.